

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Notes on Rock Parrots including a pale coloured variant at Augusta, Western Australia – The Rock Parrot (*Neophema petrophila*) is found along the South-West coast of Western Australia and into South Australia, extending from Shark Bay in WA eastwards to Robe in SA. It is generally found in coastal vegetation among rocks. It is a small parrot of approximately 22cm in length, dull olive-green in colour, with blue markings on the forehead and around the eyes, and the edge of the shoulder and wing, and it can have a bluish tinge to the top of the tail. The tail is yellow underneath. Simpson and Day (2004) also list salty marshes, coastal dunes and rocky islands as preferred habitat for the Rock Parrot.

Augusta is a small town on the very South-West tip of WA, near the junction of the Indian and Southern oceans. It is positioned on the edge of the Blackwood River as it flows into Flinders Bay, part of the Southern Ocean. Since the mid 1970's, the river mouth location has changed, with the river turning east at the previous mouth, and extending for about a kilometre along the shore before turning sharply south to join the ocean. A large sandbar has formed in this time, extending from the mainland on the seaward side of the river, creating an extended estuary, and the sand bar has been colonised by a wide variety of plants as it has become

consolidated over time. A common plant found over the sandbar among the fore-dunes is *Arctotheca populifolia* (Dune Cabbage) – a prostrate multi-branched annual or short-lived perennial belonging to the Asteraceae, with large ovate fleshy silver green leaves. It has yellow daisy flowers, followed by long-stemmed seed heads. This plant is a migrant from South Africa and Mozambique, first reported in WA in 1928 in Bunbury, and it is now established along the shores of south-west WA (Ripley and Rowland, 2004).

I have observed on many occasions various species of parrot utilising Dune Cabbage as a food source at the Blackwood River mouth sand bar. Carnaby's Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*) and Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*) chew the seed heads in situ, or bite off the seed heads and extract the seeds while holding the seed head in their foot. I have also on many occasions observed Rock Parrots foraging between the individual plants of Dune Cabbage, and feeding (presumably) on seeds scattered on the sand. Usually Rock Parrots in this area move around in small flocks of 5–10 individuals, and it is common to see several flocks flying around or foraging in the dunes at the same time. There has been a significant increase in the number of Rock Parrots in this area over the past 20–30 years, as the sand bar has increased in size. In June 2007, I

observed a group comprising three pairs of Rock Parrots feeding in the dunes, and one of the individuals was a striking pale yellowish olive colour. This individual was much brighter than normal olive-coloured individuals. A bright yellow band appeared to extend from the upper wing across the back.

I returned the next day in the hope of seeing the pale variant again, and was amazed to see a flock of 42 Rock Parrots (including the variant) flying around and settling down to forage in different parts of the sand dunes. Over many visits to the site in succeeding years, I have not encountered the yellow variant again.

I have never otherwise seen a flock of Rock Parrots bigger than about 15 individuals, either before or after the occasion reported above.

REFERENCES

SIMPSON, K. and DAY, N. 2004. *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* 7th Edition. Penguin Group, Australia.

RIPPEY, E. and ROWLAND, B. 2004. *Coastal Plants – Perth and the South-West Region*. University of Western Australia Press.

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